abstract

The gigantic change that from 1868 onwards transformed Japan into a modern state was deeply rooted in the 18th-century movements known as ‘Dutch studies’ (rangaku 蘭学) and ‘Western studies’ (yōgaku 洋学), which first fuelled the country’s quest for the innovation of Japanese art, culture and science. In the second half of the 18th century, several Japanese painters, captivated by western arts’ naturalism and realism, became fervent kyūri gakusha 究理学者 and yōgakusha 洋学者, i.e. scholars of natural sciences and western studies, thus laying the foundations for the modernization of Japan in the Meiji era (1868–1912).

Introduction

In about 1620 the Tokugawa shogunate had enforced the strict measures known as ‘Prohibition of the Seas’ (Kaikin 海禁), impeding foreigners to land on Japanese soil – with the exception of the Dutch and the Chinese in Nagasaki – and banning Japanese subjects from going abroad. This severe isolationist policy also restricted all fishing activities to the coastal waters, in order to avoid the risk of the boats drifting away and falling into the hands of foreigners eager to obtain information on Japan. European prints imported by the Dutch residing in Deshima, however, filtered into Japan, forming secretly owned collections that came to be studied in Nagasaki, Edo and the provinces.

Japanese painters and ukiyo-e print makers active in the last quarter of the 18th century undertook experimenting chiaroscuro and linear perspective, copying exotic cityscapes and landscapes, imitating European oil paintings, copperplate engravings (dōbanga 銅版画) and ‘lens-and-mirror pictures’ (megane-e 眼鏡絵).

Innovative painting studios, amongst which the fief-patronised Akita school, diffused in Japan pivotal elements of western visual culture and science, thus contributing to trigger awareness that the country’s backwardness urgently necessitated to be amended and updated. Albeit politically monitored and repressively surveyed, the European artistic and scientific vision took root in Japan’s intellectual humus and in the figurative artists’ milieus, further enhancing propensity to cultural innovation.

Yōgakusha’s landscape views and visions

Prominent yōgakusha such as Shiba Kōkan 司馬江漢 (?1747–1818; figs 1-2), Satake Shozan 佐竹曙山 (1748–1785; fig. 3) and Odano Naotake 小田野直武 (1749–1780; fig. 4), all pupils of Hiraga Gennai 平賀源内 (1726–1779), also painted landscapes using the traditional hanging scroll format (kakejiku 掛軸), and adapting their habitual techniques for rendering chiaroscuro. Constructed and conjured up as eclectic compositions rich in symbolic contents and imbued
with exotic, outlandish atmospheres, these yōgakusha’s views are legible as visual allegories, cryptographies and metaphors. In plain words, these works constitute innovative landscape configurations, expressing the artists’ aspirations and hopes to travel the unknown world and to get to know foreign countries and cultures located beyond the ocean.

In a view of Mimeguri 三関 painted by Shiba Kōkan (fig. 1), for instance, the shape of the famous place’s (meisho 名所) stony shrine gate (torii 鳥居) is hybridised with that of famous archaeological remains in the Roman Forum, the so-called Tempio dei Cāstori. This work also bears a satirical poem (kyōka 狂歌) by Ōta Nanpo 太田南畝 (1749–1823) containing a clear reference to America 利利加利利, as well as the expression “to go around to see” (mimekuri 見めくり). To put it simply, the Edo meisho depicted in this kakejiku is a metaphoric landscape, a true and proper cryptography, a vision covertly expressing Kōkan’s aspirations to travel the world “from the northern to the eastern corner”.

Figure 1. Shiba Kōkan, View of Mimeguri as a Parody of a Western Landscape, 1790 ca. Kakejiku, ink and colours on silk, 93.5 x 31 cm. Genoa, Museo Chiossone (P-194).

Figure 2. Shiba Kōkan (1747–1818), Japanese crested ibis (toki), young grey heron (aosagi) and kingfisher (kawasemi) on the shore of a stretch of water with the view of a western towered town, 1793–1796. Kakejiku, oil painting on silk, 139 x 79.8 cm. Collection of John and Kimiko Powers (Source: Asano, Ozaki, Tanaka 1985, fig. 49 p. 33).
The analysis of a few other paintings reveals that the yōgakusha artists had a pictorial idiom in common. Amongst the symbols and figurative tools appearing in their allegoric and metaphoric paintings, birds and water expanses are of primary importance. Whether in flocks or singly, birds represent the artists’ desire to take wing in the free, open and vast dimension of knowledge. This meaning is especially clear and cogent when great flyers, migratory and exotic birds are depicted – i.e. creatures capable of venturing along the inscrutable routes leading to the Immortals’ fabulous islands located in the middle of mythical oceans (fig. 2).

Incidentally, the Japanese were fond of the voices and colourful plumages of exotic birds imported by the Dutch into Japan from South Asia and Australia. Over time, several exotic birds escaped from their cages settling in Japan, thereby becoming symbols of freedom regained.

For instance, the red parakeet (īnko インコ, Alisterus scapularis) was studied and copied from life by several yōgakusha, including the Akita school artists, who reproduced it in several scientific drawings.

Satake Shozan, the founder himself of the Akita school, painted an impressive kakejiku whose protagonist is an īnko perched on a pine tree against the background of a western waterscape (fig. 3).

Lakes, paddy fields, ponds, and even simple stretches of water appearing in yōgakusha’s pictures can be interpreted as symbolic substitutes of the ocean, the latter representing not only the natural border of Japan, but also the elemental dimension through which relevant cultural innovations had reached the country in the course of several centuries. The boats depicted sailing off shore possibly hint at these historical circumstances, but may be also understood as a hoped-for transgression of the ‘Prohibition of the Seas’.

Figure 3. Satake Shozan (1748-1785), Red parakeet (īnko) perched on a pine tree with the background view of a western waterscape, before 1785. Kakejiku, ink and colours on silk, 173 x 58 cm (Source: Asano, Ozaki, Tanaka 1985, fig. 25 p. 29).
A celebrated painting by Odano Naotake depicting a perspective view of Shinobazu no ike shows on the horizon, in the middle of the pond, the islet hosting the ancient shrine dedicated to Benzaiten, the female divinity of the ocean (fig. 4).

The islet is legible as an image of ocean-surrounded Japan, whilst Benzaiten is knowledge itself, implied in the ocean dimension.

In the right foreground, two pots containing Japanese plants include a beautiful, blooming grass peony (shakuyaku 芍薬). A vegetal emblem of the traditional Sino-Japanese pharmacopoeia, the peony is potted into a molded terracotta vase from Holland – this image suggesting not only Naotake’s personal history and his rangakusha’s views and visions, but also hinting at the botanical collections gathered in Japan and conveyed to the Netherlands by the Dutch.

Then, the covert message intentionally encrypted by the artist in this beautiful painting suggests that Japan’s traditional science, if “planted” into a western method of thinking, can happily flourish while constantly remaining in view of the world.

Notes
1) For a thorough analysis of this painting, see Failla 2015.